

Eva Oledzka, *Medieval & Renaissance Interiors in Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: British Library, 2016). 160 pp., hard-back, 140 col. illus., ISBN 978-0-7123-4973-4. £25. Only £11.99 post-free on Postscript Books.

A number of books on regional furniture have included paintings of interiors which have helped to understand the functions of rooms – Claudia Kinmonth's *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, Richard Bebb's *Welsh Furniture* and Bill Cotton's *Scottish Vernacular Furniture* among them – but art has been under-used as a resource. Flemish paintings often include furniture and have obvious potential, especially when they are on panels which have been dendro-dated. The present book is based on a selection of 140 manuscript illuminations of interiors, mainly from fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy, Flanders and France and mostly in the British Library. All have detailed captions with source information.

A context-setting chapter introduces the architectural features of domestic buildings and the subject of representations of domestic interiors in art (the earliest examples being French illuminations, Flemish panel

paintings and Italian frescoes), their changing creators (from monks to secular artists) and their commissioners (with, at their peak, the fifteenth-century bankers and merchants of Florence and Bruges). There follow two chapters with long discussions of walls (which distinguishes between tapestries, wall hangings, and murals which imitate them) and windows (covering the use of glass, shutters, and casements), and shorter sections on ceilings (open timbered, vaulted stone and brick, and panelled and coffered), floors (brick, stone, tiles and matting), doors, stairs and vestibules. The longest chapter, covering 'essential comforts' discusses heating (fireplaces and stoves), lighting (oil lamps, candlesticks and chandeliers), hygiene, beds (a long section ranging from the simplest to the most elaborate), chests, cupboards and shelves, benches, chairs and stools, and tables. This sequence is deliberately object-based rather than room-based given the prevalence of multi-purpose rooms. A short final chapter covers gold and silver tableware, and maiolica (which were highly prized and carefully depicted in illuminations) and two types of specialized room: 'studies' which housed

curiosity cabinets, and libraries which housed desks and lecterns.

In each chapter the author scrutinizes the images and brings to bear her knowledge of art history and domestic 'material culture' to discuss the context in which the illuminations were painted, the social status of the commissioner and of the interior depicted. The dated images enable the reader to track the arrival of late gothic panelling and renaissance influence through different countries at different speeds. Inevitably, the interiors over-represent wealthy households but she includes some images of peasant houses.

The author states that the aim of the book is 'principally to provide the reader with an enjoyable visual resource supplemented by background information' (p. 9). This undervalues it. The book is indeed a visual feast but its wide coverage, scholarly approach and balanced judgements show a lightly-worn expertise based on doctoral research.

Although the author says that she does not fully discuss 'the complex issues of the realism of representations' (p. 9), the great value of the images in this book is the vividness of their colour due to their lack of exposure to light over centuries, the extent of detail they show and their close dating. Students of medieval furniture and interiors rely on inventories and wills which rarely go beyond brief descriptions and surviving pieces whose integrity may be doubtful, whose colour has largely gone and whose typicality is questionable (for example, fragile furniture such as small tables rarely seems to have survived). Working from colourful images addresses some of these limitations but introduces new questions: did the lack of mastery of perspective affect images, are the pieces shown real or imagined (see the discussion of Henry VIII and a four-poster bed shown in a 1540-1 image in Fig. 106), is the artist representing the present or the past, are the manuscripts in their original condition and are their dates secure?

In A4 format, printed on art paper and with a clearly-set text, this book is a pleasure to read and is strongly recommended. Hopefully it will inspire research on early furniture.